



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

---

Volume 21 | Number 2

Article 6

---

2009

### Stillborn: A Parody of Latter-day Saint Faith

Blair Dee Hodges

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hodges, Blair Dee (2009) "Stillborn: A Parody of Latter-day Saint Faith," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol21/iss2/6>

This Sectarian Anti-Mormonism is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** Stillborn: A Parody of Latter-day Saint Faith

**Author(s)** Blair Dee Hodges

**Reference** *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 97-132.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** Review of *I Was a Born-Again Mormon: Moving Toward Christian Authenticity* (2003), by Shawn McCraney.

## STILLBORN: A PARODY OF LATTER-DAY SAINT FAITH

Blair Dee Hodges

Review of Shawn McCraney. *I Was a Born-Again Mormon: Moving Toward Christian Authenticity*. New York: Alatheia Press, 2003 (reprinted with modifications in April 2007). xx + 358 pp., with bibliography. \$9.99.

In this self-published book, Shawn McCraney describes his alienation from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before becoming a born-again Christian. He tells of a period of deep anguish as a Latter-day Saint in the 1980s, and though he continued attending his church meetings, he felt increasingly separated from God. By 1997 he was having difficulty keeping a steady job and sustaining his marriage because of an addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol. He felt he had “lost all connection to the God [he] once longed to know.” He yearned for meaning and peace. One afternoon while driving, he heard a radio preacher discuss sin and rebirth. McCraney became convinced he had been a sinner since birth and could do nothing to merit a place in God’s kingdom. As a Latter-day Saint, he thought obeying the gospel meant following a set of rules in order to earn salvation. Suddenly he realized for the first time that Christ was more than an “intellectual necessity” and that he “really, truly *needed*” a Savior. He prayed for forgiveness and asked Christ to come into his heart. “Nothing tangible or metaphysical occurred,” so he told the Lord he would wait for a response. His mind then flashed back to several events in his life showing he had not been an “authentic

Christian.” He felt like a new person and was not worried about how he would reconcile this spiritual rebirth with his membership in the Church of Jesus Christ (pp. 71–73, 79, emphasis in original).

### **Aftermath of Regeneration**

Feeling increasingly alienated from the Church of Jesus Christ, McCraney sank deeper into sin and despair. What he describes as his moral “backsliding” deepened despite his emotionally profound regeneration. He could not overcome “his sinful nature and just live righteously.” He wondered “if this was how a born again life was supposed to be lived, meaning, all a person has to do is claim Jesus as a personal Savior and then go on sinning like there is no tomorrow.” At the same time, he felt he “was unconditionally saved by the blood of Jesus Christ and that [he] had a place with God because of Him.” Being “saved” didn’t rid him of temptation; he still “didn’t have the will to stop living in opposition to this truth.” The weight of what he describes as his “failures as a forgiven Christian came very close to drowning [him] in the sewage of [his] soul” (pp. 88–89).

McCraney reports that in 2002, at least four years after being “saved,” he requested excommunication from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In addition to his own moral failures, he offers a number of reasons, including “some serious disagreements” he had with “key doctrinal positions the Church maintained.” If he were to decide to again become a Latter-day Saint, he wanted to do so “on his own terms.” He describes “two hours of some rather intense and even heated debate” in a disciplinary council that resulted in what he says he desired and deserved: excommunication (pp. 89–90).

### **Why a Book?**

According to the back cover of *I Was a Born-Again Mormon*, McCraney has answered the following questions: “Can a Latter-day Saint experience spiritual rebirth? Will Christians and Latter-day Saints ever unite? Why does anti-Mormon literature generally fail? How can someone tell if they’ve been born-again? What is the theo-

logical basis for LDS beliefs?” Readers are then promised that they will “discover some of the best answers to these questions and many more in the pages of *Born-Again Mormon*.”

The book is McCraney’s “unadulterated expose” [*sic*] of his “personal failures as an unregenerated Latter-day Saint” (p. ix)<sup>1</sup> and his experience in becoming a born-again Christian. He sees a “universal need” for the book because “most Latter-day Saints have no idea what spiritual rebirth actually means and therefore, having never experienced it, can only deny its reality and/or describe it as false” (p. xvii). McCraney intends to “illustrate some of the inherent problems faced by members of the Church who love Mormonism but need more to thrive spiritually than the rites, demands, and culture it provides” (p. ix). He seeks to “introduce all Latter-day Saints to the God-given gift of undeniable spiritual rebirth that comes through true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (p. xviii). He hopes “to help Born-Again believers appreciate and support positive aspects of the LDS Church while simultaneously (but politely) rejecting any doctrine or practice contrary to biblical truth and authentic Christian beliefs” (p. vii). He reaches out to those still “spiritually yearning about their place with God; who silently question many of the doctrines, practices or cultural expectations present in the Church *today*, but who remain active out of fear, personal comfort, and even family continuity” (p. xiii, emphasis in original).

*Born-Again Mormon* was first issued in 2003, a year after McCraney was excommunicated. An additional and slightly revised printing, renamed *I Was a Born-Again Mormon*, appeared in 2007. The title change, McCraney says, was intended “to clear it up for whining Christians and cynical LDS that I am no longer a member of the church—but the title retails [*sic*] the idea that I was born-again WHILE in the LDS Church.”<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Like the entire first printing of McCraney’s book, the first twenty pages of the reprinting are not paginated. Of necessity, I have assigned roman numerals to these pages, beginning with the title page and continuing through the prologue (pp. viii–xi) and introduction (pp. xii–xx).

2. McCraney, e-mail message to author, 20 August 2008.

Despite endorsements from several evangelicals, including Pastor Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel and also Professor Craig J. Hazen of Biola University, it appears that criticism by various evangelical countercult ministries led to changes in the second printing. Ed Decker warns conservative Protestants to

be *very very* cautious. . . When you claim to be a born again Mormon but still bow at the altar of a man/god who lives with his many wives on the planet near the great star kolob and your jesus is the brother of lucifer and was voted on to be the savior by a council of gods... and you make no public stand on these essential differences... God is NOT being served here. If he did make such a stand, he would not be a Mormon, He would be excommunicated.. He is there to be used as an example of the Mormons being just like Christians..someone who is born again and also a Mormon... Bless him.. but he is going to get burned ... and that is before judgment.. Pray for him by all means.. support him with \$\$ by no means. He may sound very much like a real born again person and I don't suggest he isn't but he is making perfect landings at the wrong airport.<sup>3</sup>

Glenn Evans, of the anti-Mormon Institute for Religious Research, claims that “McCraney’s syncretism of Christianity and Mormonism . . . does not give a balanced or accurate view of either Christianity or Mormonism.” Despite making many of the same objections to the Church of Jesus Christ that McCraney makes in his book, Evans wonders “whether [McCraney] is correct in thinking that a person can be saved by placing their faith in the Jesus Christ presented by the Mormon Church.” Though McCraney criticizes a straw man of the “Mormon Jesus,” Evans still finds McCraney to be far *too* Mormon.<sup>4</sup>

---

3. Ed Decker, “Comments from those who minister to Mormons regarding Shawn McCraney’s ministry,” 17 October 2006, <http://www.mazeministry.com/mormonism/misc/boardmeeting.htm> (accessed 8 April 2009), faulty capitalization and punctuation per original. Decker did not realize that McCraney had been excommunicated.

4. Glenn Evans, “Born Again [*sic*] Mormon: Moving Toward Christian Authenticity,” <http://www.irr.org/mit/born-again-mormon-br.html> (accessed 8 April 2009).

McCraney stresses the unity among “biblical Christians” yet grants that “divergent opinions on the small stuff are allowed in the body of Christ—as long as the core beliefs are maintained” (p. 221). Though evangelicals tend to talk about unity on essentials among the various denominations they assume make up the body of Christ, the criticism McCraney has received from some countercult ministries indicates an undercurrent of disagreement on important aspects of faith.<sup>5</sup> For example, McCraney’s belief that a faithful Latter-day Saint *can* be born again—that is, in an evangelical sense—and remain in the Church of Jesus Christ has been questioned by Eric Johnson of Mormon Research Ministries. Such a possibility represents “the complete antithesis of biblical orthodoxy. This idea is just as strange as Paul recommending that new Christians continue worshipping at the Temple of Dianna [*sic*] while simultaneously fellowshipping in a Christian community.” Though Johnson grants that McCraney has been regenerated, he asserts the book itself is “unried, unprovable, and even sometimes unbiblical. I think he needs to revisit the very idea that it is possible to be born again while remaining Mormon. This idea makes no biblical sense at all and should be rejected as a plausible evangelistic strategy.”<sup>6</sup>

Following such criticism, McCraney, when he revised the book for the second edition, became more adamant about what happens when a Latter-day Saint is *truly* born again: the person either ceases membership in the Church of Jesus Christ or continues attending only to help others become regenerated. In the first printing of his book, McCraney says that the result of a Latter-day Saint’s emotional rebirth “in terms of worship, fellowship, or membership is between the regenerated soul and the Lord” (“Introduction,” p. xi). In the second printing he adds,

---

5. For an introduction to the sometimes radical differences among evangelicals, even on what constitutes a core belief, see Louis Midgley, “On Caliban Mischief,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): xi–xxxv.

6. Eric Johnson, review of *I Was a Born-Again Mormon: Moving Toward Christian Authenticity*, by Shawn McCraney, <http://www.mrm.org/topics/reviews/born-again-mormon-moving-toward-christian-authenticity> (accessed 2 November 2008). For more reviews from evangelicals, see [4witness.org/ldsnews/bornagainmormon.php](http://4witness.org/ldsnews/bornagainmormon.php) (accessed 13 August 2008).

“From my experience, however, I am fairly certain as to where He will lead every believer in the end” (p. xv). And further: “We do not make an issue of what church a reborn-Christian attends [*sic*]. This being said, we do acknowledge the importance of hearing the Word of God taught in a worshipful setting, and recommend that all believers ultimately choose to belong to a religion that feeds them spiritually—that is, through the hearing of His divine Word” (p. xiv). To his claim that he wrote *Born-Again Mormon* to support “those born-again Saints who might choose to remain active in the Church while working to bring other members . . . to the Lord” (p. xviii), McCraney has added in the second printing, “Admittedly, this is a far-fetched concept. But the Lord sometimes works in mysterious ways” (p. xviii).<sup>7</sup>

McCraney grants that he has “an agenda”—one that is “out in the open and aimed at bringing Latter-day Saints to the Lord by attacking erroneous doctrines and practices and not the physical church they have grown to love” (p. viii). Yet he denies that he is anti-Mormon (e.g., p. xiii n. 4). This is largely a distinction without a difference, however, though he makes efforts to distinguish his approach from those he labels “anti-Mormon.”<sup>8</sup>

### An Extended Exit Narrative

In 2001 and 2002 McCraney published pieces in *Sunstone* magazine but did not relate an account of his spiritual rebirth until he published *Born-Again Mormon* in 2003.<sup>9</sup> He then trained for pastoral ministry at the Calvary Chapel School of Ministry and began host-

---

7. The largest textual addition to the second printing of McCraney’s book is an expansion of what he considers the differences between his approach to the Church of Jesus Christ and those approaches he labels “anti-Mormon” (see pp. 270–78).

8. See pp. 60–61 for his own use of the label *anti-Mormon* to describe evangelizing methods and a literature that “Jesus would . . . [not] approve of.” This distinction will be discussed below.

9. See Shawn McCraney, “Unthinkable!” *Sunstone*, November 2001, 18–19, and “Alternative Subculture,” *Sunstone*, December 2002, 2. He has also participated in various *Sunstone* symposia. He presented a paper entitled “On the Verge: Will Mormonism Become Christian?” on 14 August 2004 at the *Sunstone* Symposium in Salt Lake City and another paper entitled “The Difficult Balancing Act of Being a Born Again [*sic*] Mormon” on 17 April 2004. He also participated in a *Sunstone* panel discussion in Salt Lake City

ing a television program in Utah called *Heart of the Matter*. He now serves as pastor of Calvary Campus and leads ministries in Salt Lake City and Logan. He tends to repeat the same message—namely, how his experience of being born again led him to discover that the Church of Jesus Christ is not Christian. He then calls for Latter-day Saints individually and the Church of Jesus Christ collectively to become Christian.

McCraney's account closely follows what Seth R. Payne calls the "ex-Mormon exit narrative," which often mirrors the "captivity narratives" described by sociologists.<sup>10</sup> *I Was a Born-Again Mormon* echoes previous evangelical critics who, as Payne explains,

find the modern LDS Church subversive on mostly theological grounds. They reason that because the beliefs and practices of the Church are so beyond what could be considered traditional Christianity, that individual Mormons are in spiritual danger and that their eternal souls are in jeopardy. Consequently, these groups are generally formed [into] ministries to help "witness to Mormons" about the "real Jesus" in an effort to bring them out of Mormonism.<sup>11</sup>

McCraney includes each characteristic Payne identifies in his study of ex-Mormon exit narratives. First, to "establish credibility,"<sup>12</sup> exit narratives typically list various credentials and church experiences in order to legitimize the story as coming from an authentic insider. McCraney makes certain to do so often (e.g., pp. 35 and 38, where he lists various callings and length of membership). Second, "the apology"<sup>13</sup> explains why the person's membership was retained for so long and points out that the person had been unaware of cer-

---

that considered the question, "How 'Christian' Should Mormonism Strive to Be?" on 14 August 2004.

10. Seth R. Payne, "Purposeful Strangers: A Study of the Ex-Mormon Narrative," delivered at the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, on 9 August 2008. Payne's published presentation is found at <http://www.mormonstudies.net/pdf/strangers.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2009).

11. Payne, "Purposeful Strangers," 10–11.

12. Payne, "Purposeful Strangers," 18.

13. Payne, "Purposeful Strangers," 19.

tain historical or doctrinal controversies. McCraney attributes his church membership to his upbringing (p. 35) and recalls feeling “the Spirit” at church meetings (p. 56), but he later considers such experiences to be nothing but mere human emotions that should not be trusted (pp. 333–34). Third, the narratives include the “laundry list” of “doctrinal/historical problems.”<sup>14</sup> These points establish what ex-Mormons see as the obvious falsehood of Mormonism. McCraney devotes the second part of his book to these issues, for instance, the alleged Mormon belief that “Mary was a virgin up until the time she had holy sexual relations with God Himself” (p. 243). According to McCraney, Latter-day Saints almost never talk about Jesus. This remarkable and incorrect claim is made repeatedly (see pp. 260–61). According to Payne, the final element, “the testimony,” consists of “an expression of gratitude for new-found freedoms or beliefs.”<sup>15</sup> In McCraney’s narrative, most church members are described as “tired, struggling, heavy, and dull” (p. 285), drawn into the trap by “the most appealing humanistic religion on earth” (p. 237). Relief is found in becoming regenerated as understood by McCraney’s interpretation of the Bible.

By following this narrative pattern, McCraney’s book offers nothing particularly new, aside from personal experiences that constitute his more interesting (though largely unverifiable) points. Much of the book is clouded with borrowed or flawed interpretations of Latter-day Saint doctrine and history as understood by McCraney and often couched in remembered conversations.

In both printings McCraney quotes from a poem by Walt Whitman (1819–1892): “The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything” (p. vi).<sup>16</sup> This language is intended to “tell readers not to take every line as absolute fact but to take the drift of the book seriously.” This is one reason McCraney says he decided not to include page numbers in the first printing, but he now believes the strategy

---

14. Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 24.

15. Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 27. There are many more examples of each of these characteristics throughout McCraney’s book.

16. The line is from “Shut Not Your Doors, &c,” which appears in Whitman’s collection *Leaves of Grass*.

“didn’t work [because] the complaints outweighed the attempt so we changed it to normalcy.”<sup>17</sup> The revised printing is paginated except for, as already noted, the first twenty pages. The book also now has a larger and more readable font. Unfortunately, most of the numerous typographical and factual errors have been perpetuated. Because the drift matters more to McCraney than precise details, he explains: “Mistakes are not a concern for me. I don’t mind imperfect work. I am imperfect [*sic*] therefore so will my work be imperfect.”<sup>18</sup> Despite its flaws, the drift of the book provides some insight into McCraney’s personal apostasy and the struggle some may have grasping an “authentic Christianity.”<sup>19</sup>

### From “Stalwart” to “Apostate”

McCraney describes his own spiritual crisis as resulting from an excessively legalistic approach to the gospel. This resulted in frustration, depression, a strong sense of personal hypocrisy, and, ultimately, apostasy. McCraney’s mother is described as an active Latter-day Saint who, we are told, never “really [bought] into all the doctrines and theologies that the Church stalwarts claim are so important” (p. 38). His father joined the church in order to help raise his children and then virtually ceased activity once his last child was married (p. 37). Strongly playing on stereotypes, McCraney observes, “By acknowledging my father’s and mother’s relative weakness in the faith, some LDS readers will automatically assume that . . . if I had experienced a *proper* LDS upbringing, which would have included a dedicated, strong priesthood-holding father, and a scripture-toting, Book of

---

17. McCraney, e-mail message to author, 20 August 2008.

18. McCraney, e-mail message to author, 20 August 2008.

19. Throughout this review I employ *apostate* and *apostasy* in their technical sense. As Payne explains: “Recent ex-Mormon narratives . . . focus on the description of a fundamental shift away from what is perceived as rigid literalism to an unbounded scientific [or evangelical] rationality. In this sense, members of the emerging ex-Mormon movement should be sociologically considered apostates although I hesitate to employ this label due to the extremely negative connotations this word has within the LDS community. . . . I use this word purely in a technical sense and in no way intend to attach inherent negative connotations to its meaning” (Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 3–4).

Mormon quoting [*sic*] mother, I would undoubtedly be stronger in the Church and not so inclined to constantly examine and question it.” However, he tells readers it is “dangerous to categorically make such an assessment and consider it certain” (p. 38).<sup>20</sup>

“I cannot recall a time when I did not desperately yearn to truly know God,” McCraney reflects, “and when I did not possess a tremendous and natural inclination toward mischief, rebellion, and sin” (p. 39). Given great latitude in his youth to run free in Southern California, he found himself falling in with “wild boys and loose girls” and becoming caught up in “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” while still remaining socially active in the church. He “could not spend any amount of time with members who believed themselves holy and not walk away finding them just as sinful” as he was, only in different ways. Among the Saints, he encountered “gossiping, lying, judging, anger, violence, hypocrisy, selfishness, stinginess, and a host of other sinful attributes found in the souls of unsaved men and women” (pp. 40–41). And the few times McCraney mentions the kindness of a particular Latter-day Saint leader or friend, he does not connect such charitable actions with their faith in Christ (e.g., p. 69).

McCraney recalls enjoying his reputation as a rebel and marveling at how many members “longed for [his] come-uppance” (p. 41). By age nineteen his wild life had left him empty, and he decided to straighten up by serving a full-time Latter-day Saint mission. He vowed to use “every minute of the mission to truly fix [himself]” by strictly following missionary rules. He started to feel good about himself but overreached: “I eventually found myself arrogantly believing that, because I was behaving well and doing some things well, I myself had become a good person” (pp. 42–43). McCraney asserts that his pride resulted from obedience to rules and that his outward appearance of goodness was only a facade. “Remember,” he warns, “Hitler hated burlesque, wouldn’t touch alcohol, demanded a clean, scrubbed appearance,

---

20. Such caution is absent when McCraney directly attributes Joseph Smith’s religious concepts to his upbringing and the influence of his father and mother. He attributes Smith’s religious thought to familial influence, borrowing the interpretations of C. Jess Groesbeck, Grant Palmer, D. Michael Quinn, Craig Hazen, and others (pp. 123–37).

and sought to elevate every aspect of the human condition through outward strictures. But this didn't make the Nazis holy in the least" (p. 44).<sup>21</sup> These observations recall his earlier explanation of sin in which he posits that "human beings have the need . . . to conform to all sorts of outward expectations in an attempt to gain social acceptance and make themselves look and feel good" (p. 9).

Somewhat surprisingly, McCraney sees nothing insidious about Latter-day Saint missionary efforts; he even grants that some missionaries might discover the Lord through their service, though he did not. He recalls leaving the mission field feeling sanctified from sin and worthy to enter God's presence solely through his own efforts and service. He firmly believed, "as many LDS leaders and friends had explained, that the sacrifice of Jesus was there to pick up any slack or sin I might have forgotten to take care of, but that I had essentially paved my own road to heaven" (p. 44). Nevertheless, his feelings of being a righteous Saint quickly faded when he returned from his mission. "After two or three hours of exposure to the licentious world, I was confronted with the ridiculousness of my ever thinking I . . . had become good while on the mission. . . . I was very aware that my heart had not changed at all" (p. 47).

McCraney believed that the best way to avoid his sinful lusts was through marriage. A day after returning from his mission, he was engaged to be married (p. 48). Within six months he was sealed to his wife, Mary, in the Los Angeles Temple, and a year and a half later they had their first daughter. He meticulously reports that, after moving to Richmond, Utah, they continued to attend the temple and church meetings regularly, pay tithes, keep the Word of Wisdom, and serve in various callings. Perhaps some of McCraney's earlier confidence about being a good person had returned. Yet he still felt something was wrong. "I knew what I was inside, my *real* self, my *true* soul, the churning creature who cried out desperately to really know the Lord, not just a person who acted as if he did" (p. 49). This self-desperation became an obsession when McCraney was called to serve as elders quorum president in a student ward at Brigham Young University. He

---

21. See p. 342 for another comparison of Latter-day Saints to Hitler.

would make sure his quorum achieved 100 percent home teaching by personally visiting any missed homes each month, sometimes more than once, frantically knocking on doors and leaving notes, even on Halloween night. Despite reaching his goal, he felt like he “continued to *do*, instead of *be*,” explaining, “I sought to do everything I could to have God approve of my soul. If pleasing the Lord meant killing myself in the attempt to obey Him then so be it” (pp. 51–52). McCraney admits this approach was far too extreme for many Latter-day Saints. Yet how could anything less than 100 percent please God? He wondered why some members would run to the store for a gallon of milk on Sunday or why some Saints were “so darn mean” instead of being filled with love. While focusing increasingly on the failures of others, he “pressed on in the faith, zealously adhering to the Church and its standards . . . [and becoming] more legalistic, less patient, and mean-spirited to anyone who wouldn’t see things the way” he understood them. “Outwardly I was pious. Inwardly, a phony” (pp. 53–55).

Spending all his free time reading church books, he found the gospel intellectually fulfilling, which to him meant “there was an answer or doctrine for nearly every problem or situation that rose up under the theological sun” (p. 58). He “firmly believed that the Church’s teachings were infallible and were capable of leading all souls back to God” (p. 55)—all souls, perhaps, but his own. “When I looked at my soul, heart, mind, and nature, I could not see myself as pleasing to God,” he recalls. “The whole theological construct was failing me.” Though he believed he had not committed any sin that would explain his negative feelings, he nevertheless realized he was “living a lie”—actively involved in the church but still a “failure who possessed a sinful heart.” Church leaders and friends advised him to continue to attend church, study the scriptures, and pray, assuring him that the Holy Ghost would eventually give him peace (pp. 55–57). No such peace came. Hounded by feelings of personal inadequacy, McCraney left BYU without graduating in 1987.<sup>22</sup> The family soon moved back to California, and he took up a full-time job. He began investigating Mormon history in order to find, he admits, problems with the church that would justify his own shortcomings.

---

22. McCraney, e-mail message to author, 10 June 2009.

“I was young and in denial,” he reflects. “The real problem lay within me.” Despite this concession, he still claims “there is much to question regarding the Church, its history and its early leaders” (p. 59). For a year he waded through anti-Mormon<sup>23</sup> literature and consequently “lost all [his] desire to even pursue the idea of God” (p. 61). “After having believed that the Church was true and the only way to God, and then pushing myself to the point where I questioned everything about it, I discovered that I had nothing inside upon which I could rely. . . . I was left to a state of complete spiritual weakness. . . . Unable to trust the institution any longer, I turned, like so many others, to the world for solace and support” (p. 63).

After unearthing from his study of Mormon history what he considered to be “enough damning evidence against the Church to send it packing all the way back to 1820,” McCraney sought to share it with as many members as he could. Most with whom he spoke were uninterested in his findings, preferring to believe that reasonable explanations existed (pp. 59–60). Feeling alone, McCraney suffered “a major crisis of faith. . . . My mind wandered. Maybe God lived in the human heart and I had no reason to change. Maybe *I* was God! Maybe God was an elephant in the cosmos. Maybe God is just an idea—real in the sense that we cling to it, but not in the sense that He literally exists. I became unsure about what I knew and especially in how I thought I could know anything. I was . . . adrift” (pp. 61–62).

### “Desperate and Angry”

McCraney describes a deep sense of betrayal and anger inside those who lose their faith and feel cheated by the institutional church. He recalls wandering in “human sophistries, launching a self-guided search through secularism, philosophical thought, and the lulling haze of fictional romanticism.” He recounts having a glance at “the philosophical cathedrals of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre.” He often left work early to spend afternoons reading, a habit of absenteeism that he

---

23. *Anti-Mormon* here is McCraney’s term; it will be discussed further in this review.

could indulge—even though it repeatedly cost him his employment—by learning how to “‘job-hop’ as a means of financial survival.” He toyed with Communism. He sought answers to questions about the meaning of life by becoming absorbed in Buddhism, Islam, pantheism, Judaism, secular humanism, and art. He even tried to write the great American novel. “I had gotten to the point where I would have fallen down and worshipped a dancing golden monkey if it could have provided me with genuine peace [and] a new heart” (pp. 63–67).

By 1990 he had become “increasingly agitated and aggressive, but also depressed and even dangerously suicidal.” He “fully embraced humanism,” which became his ideology for the next seven years. He lashed out at members of his extended family when they made even the slightest “reference to God or good, mocking their every allegiance to religion” (p. 67).

Amazingly, despite all of his inner conflict, McCraney says he remained “outwardly active in the Church,” even serving on a stake high council, as a high priests group instructor, and in a bishopric. Receiving these calls during this time of “faithless-faith” caused him to realize that “no matter what people inwardly believe while a member of the Church, they will always be accepted, and at times even respected, as long as they look . . . , speak . . . , and act LDS” (p. 68). He recalls receiving support from caring leaders and members—so long as he acted the part of a faithful member, which bothered him tremendously (p. 70). He also believed that many members of the church were intolerant and hypocritical. When a friend from work gave McCraney a letter explaining her own experience of becoming a born-again Christian, he saw her as something of a “Jesus Freak” but decided to share the letter with a missionary preparation class he was teaching, only to see an “institutional and aggressive” attack from class members who mocked the Bible and proclaimed the author of the letter to be destined for hell (pp. 77–78).

Eventually, “in a desperate effort to ease the pain of [his] cankered soul,” McCraney “turned to secretly abusing alcohol and prescription drugs . . . as a way to numb and self-medicate [his] pounding pain.” In all his anxious searching he felt he had poured his whole heart out

only to find nothing but a shell. The resulting pain was “all-consuming.” He frankly acknowledges that much of this turmoil would have been avoided had he “simply clung to the Church, its programs and directives. . . . Had I possessed the will and nature to honestly live the LDS way of life, I would never have had a problem with any of these personal issues. . . . Desperate and angry, . . . I was a spiritually, emotionally, and socially broken man” (pp. 69–71).

It was at this point that McCraney heard the aforementioned radio sermon that convinced him that nothing he could ever do would give him peace; only Jesus as Lord and Savior could do that. For five more years he remained an ostensibly active Latter-day Saint while trying to reconcile his newfound spiritual life with his membership in the Church of Jesus Christ, but ultimately he found this impossible.<sup>24</sup> He bought *Here I Stand*, a book on the life of Martin Luther by Roland H. Bainton. “Words cannot describe the connection and resonance I felt toward Luther and his tumultuous search for truth. . . . I felt as if I had personally undergone (and now shared) in the same sort of spiritual transformation” (p. 80). This detail underscores his intent in authoring *I Was a Born-Again Mormon*. He seems to picture himself as a Luther pointing the way for the Church of Jesus Christ, a kind of reformer calling an apostate group to repentance.<sup>25</sup> Yet he is

---

24. Absent from the book are any details of McCraney’s seeking refuge within the pages of *Sunstone* magazine, as mentioned above. In 2001 *Sunstone* published a short story of his that described a seminary class he taught in which the students were judging an absent member as being a “slut.” He tried explaining to the class that everyone is a sinner but became frustrated when the class did not catch on. See Shawn Aaron McCraney, “Unthinkable!” *Sunstone*, November 2001, 18–19.

25. McCraney compared himself to Martin Luther again during the question-and-answer segment of his 2004 *Sunstone* Symposium paper “On the Verge: Will Mormonism Become Christian?” He explained that by requesting excommunication from the Church of Jesus Christ he hoped to return and be baptized a member as a new Christian. He even calls *Sunstone* to repentance: “*Sunstone*—the magazine, its supporters, symposiums, and direct attempts to explore ‘Mormon experience, scholarship, issues, and art’—is but a liberal mirror of the conservative LDS experience. Further, it seems to be mainly supported by socially disaffected and/or frustrated people who, either through some sort of doctrinal grind or resentment at not being called to leadership, really just want to belong. In other words, if a person cannot be one of the elect, he or she should join or form a subculture that essentially mirrors what the elect are doing and call it ‘alternative but holy.’” He concluded that “only 3.75 percent” of the last issue was “true to the *SUNSTONE*

careful not to claim a divine special revelation. “This is not the dream or vision of some pseudo-prophet type. I have received no visions, dreams, or revelations. *Born-Again Mormon* is not a book I hold up as divinely inspired or infallible” (p. 346).

### They Leave the Church but Cannot Leave It Alone

McCraney claims that “the *least* egregious infraction of Church law is the failure to act LDS while the *most* serious action a member can take and the one that draws the heaviest retribution from defenders of the faith is speaking up about the Church, its doctrine, or its leaders in a critical way—or even asking questions” (p. 69). Because the Saints place a heavy emphasis on testifying to their faith (and hence on their encounters with God), joined in community with the testimonies of others, statements challenging faith are often perceived as threatening. Professor of literature and religion Terryl L. Givens describes a paradox of Latter-day Saint certainty and also searching: “Mormons are admonished to ‘get their own testimonies,’ and not live by borrowed light. But immersion in a culture so saturated in the rhetoric of certainty inevitably produces the pressure to express, if not the reality to have, personal conviction; and it produces a socially reinforced confidence about those convictions. Perhaps this explains in part the proclivity of disaffected Mormons so frequently to react with bitterness and feelings of betrayal. It explains why people can leave the church but not leave it alone.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps it also explains why the Saints are tempted to vilify those who manifest antagonism toward the Church of Jesus Christ. McCraney remembers having heard “local leaders and higher [saying] ‘They leave the Church, but they won’t leave it alone’” (p. 63). This is commonly said of those disaffected former Saints who publish criti-

---

I have come to love, which coincidentally (or not) is about the same percentage of love I have left for the Church as a whole since my youth. What a shame. What a damn shame.” McCraney, “Alternative Subculture,” letter to the editor, *Sunstone*, December 2002, 2.

26. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275.

cism or actively attack their former faith.<sup>27</sup> It is *not* true in every case that one who leaves the church will never thereafter “leave it alone.” Some are perfectly capable of ceasing church activity without attacking the church. Those who cannot leave it alone often do so loudly, however. Like McCraney, some feel compelled to warn others about continued participation in (or becoming involved with) Mormonism, and some actively seek confrontation by ridiculing former friends and church members. The Internet offers a new avenue for detractors to anonymously criticize the faith of those who still believe. There are entire online communities, “cyberwards” of sorts, complete with testimony bearing of the falseness of the Mormon cult (or the “Morg,” as it is sometimes called) and even general conferences.<sup>28</sup> At times feelings of disgust or contempt are apparent when apostates vent about their former faith. Social critic Eric Hoffer offered what might serve as an explanation:

We always look for allies when we hate. . . . Whence come these unreasonable hatreds, and why their unifying effect? They are an expression of a desperate effort to suppress an awareness

---

27. Apparently, the saying was coined by Neal A. Maxwell in his 1979 book *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 108. He repeated the saying elsewhere, including in general conference addresses (see “The Net Gathers of Every Kind,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 14; “Becometh As a Child,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 68; “Remember How Merciful the Lord Hath Been,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 44). The phrase is conceptually tied with an account in which Joseph Smith asserted that once someone has joined the church that person has left neutral ground forever (see Daniel Tyler, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor*, 15 August 1892, 492). Both the phrase and the story have since received a fair amount of notice in various church publications and general conference addresses. See, for example, Hyrum and Helen Andrus, ed., *They Knew the Prophet: Personal Accounts from Over 100 People Who Knew Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 53–55; Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 52–53; *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121 and 122* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1996), 95; James E. Faust, “Enriching Family Life,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 40; Glenn L. Pace, “Follow the Prophet,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 25; and Mary Ellen W. Smoot, “Steadfast and Immovable,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 91.

28. Payne noted some of the unique vocabulary these online communities have developed, often reflecting a “captivity narrative” theme complete with names like “Reformed Former Mormons” or using terms like *escaped* or *recovered* (Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 2–3).

of our inadequacy, worthlessness, guilt and other shortcomings of the self. Self-contempt is here transmuted into hatred of others—and there is a most determined and persistent effort to mask this switch. Obviously, the most effective way of doing this is to find others, as many as possible, who hate as we do. . . . Much of our proselytizing consists in infecting others not with our brand of faith but with our particular brand of unreasonable hatred.<sup>29</sup>

The word *hate* here could also be read as *hurt*, and some Latter-day Saints would do well to recognize there are former members who carry real pain resulting from apostasy, alienation, and loss of faith. Some carry the pain quietly, others more vocally. Clearly not all former Mormons are miserable or angry; some report feelings of peace and release upon losing their faith, while others continue to emotionally struggle. Whether fueled by hate or hurt, McCraney points to the reaction that apostates or doubters may receive from still-believing Saints as causing strong feelings of isolation, a sense of betrayal, and worry over familial relationships. At times apostates may experience direct hostility. This hostility is neither a Christlike response nor an effective approach in helping resolve concerns (nor is the hostility unique to Latter-day Saints). Historian Richard Bushman adequately describes the problem:

Often church leaders, parents, and friends do not understand the force [of critical accounts]. Not knowing how to respond, they react defensively. They are inclined to dismiss all the evidence as anti-Mormon or of the devil. “Stop reading these things if they upset you so much,” the inquirer is told. Or “go

---

29. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York City: Harper and Row, 1956), 88. McCraney recommends and refers to Hoffer’s book several times. “Eric Hoffer, aka, the longshoreman philosopher, wrote an insightful but fairly despairing book. . . . I highly recommend this book to anyone seeking to understand the psychology of people and their relationships to mass movements. Unfortunately, Hoffer is an atheist and can be quite acerbic in his approach to life. . . . For every page of Hoffer, however, I recommend a chapter or two of the New Testament and some considerable time in earnest prayer” (p. 101 n. 39).

back to the familiar formula: scriptures, prayer, church attendance.” The troubled person may have been doing all of these things sincerely, perhaps even desperately. He or she feels the world is falling apart. Everything these inquirers put their trust in starts to crumble. They want guidance more than ever in their lives, but they don’t seem to get it. The facts that have been presented to them challenge almost everything they believe.<sup>30</sup>

Reacting to doubt with hostility, indifference, or accusations of unworthiness can be destructive to both faith and relationships. In light of how McCraney discusses his own drug and alcohol abuse, he seems to believe that some Saints inevitably attribute apostasy to sin. He is quick to explain at the outset of the book that in presenting such an “unadulterated expose” [*sic*] he risks “jeopardizing the small amount of credibility more anonymous authors generally enjoy” (p. ix). While there is scriptural warrant that various sins *can* lead to apostasy,<sup>31</sup> there is also abundant scriptural precedence indicating that, if such were invariably the case, there would be no faith in God—for example, “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6) and “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

---

30. Richard L. Bushman, “Introduction to ‘Joseph Smith and His Critics’ Seminar,” *Life On Gold Plates*, <http://www.lifeongoldplates.com/2008/08/bushmans-introduction-to-joseph-smith.html> (accessed 20 August 2008). See also Robert D. Hales, “Christian Courage: The Price of Discipleship,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 72–75: “To . . . all who seek to know how we should respond to our accusers, I reply, we *love* them. Whatever their race, creed, religion, or political persuasion, if we follow Christ and show forth His courage, we must love them. We do not feel we are *better than* they are. Rather, we desire with our love to show them a *better way*—the way of Jesus Christ.” See also Henry B. Eyring, “Helping a Student in a Moment of Doubt,” in Eyring, *To Draw Closer to God: A Collection of Discourses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 135–57.

31. “And thus we can plainly discern, that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things” (Alma 24:30; see Doctrine and Covenants 93:38–39). I believe taking these verses universally is problematic, unless doubt or loss of faith *itself* is argued to be sin.

## Grace and Works

McCraney is “convinced that there are far too many Latter-day Saints needlessly suffering under the thumb of religious indoctrination, faulty theology, and legalistic ideas of what God expects of her or him” (p. 115). He points to Saints who misunderstand or overlook Christ’s atonement by believing they can work their own way to perfection as he once did. He contends that the faith of the Saints is “based on the logical premise of the universal balance,” in which sin tips the scale toward damnation while righteousness tips it toward salvation. In pursuing this straw-man argument, McCraney holds that “the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ becomes unnecessary since positive behaviors and deeds have the potential to do the ‘balancing’ required by God.” Latter-day Saints “have arrogantly taken the duty of justification (or payment) for sin upon themselves . . . and either purposefully or inadvertently reject God’s perfect offering for human sin” (pp. 13–14).

In a parable McCraney created, Latter-day Saints view Jesus as the head janitor of a “large and beautiful school” where most students earnestly avoid making messes and are “so diligent, in fact, that they scrub their own desks and floor at the end of every day.” The filthier students who wish to avoid embarrassment “usually try to clean their own mess up before anyone else at the school sees it.” Sometimes they succeed, but other times they make the mess much worse in the attempt, and this is when “Jesus the Janitor is called. Of course He quickly shows up and graciously cleans away the entire mess, . . . but there are a whole bunch of conditions attached to His service to ensure that the mess will be removed entirely” (pp. 261–62).

Because Latter-day Saints believe that the motivation behind behavior matters (see Moroni 7:6–10; Matthew 6:1–6), this flawed understanding can result in stress, depression, and resignation for some or pride and hypocrisy for others. For McCraney, such an approach resulted in all of the above, ultimately leaving him spiritually stillborn.

Certainly some church members needlessly suffer from an incorrect or limited understanding of gospel doctrine. This is evidenced by a

host of conference talks, magazine articles, and books that point out the Saints' dependence upon divine mercy. Just months before McCraney's born-again experience, Elder Jeffery R. Holland delivered a general conference message in which he reached out to those like McCraney

who are carrying heavy burdens and feeling private pain, who are walking through the dark valleys of this world's tribulation. Some may be desperately worried about a husband or a wife or a child, worried about their health or their happiness or their faithfulness in keeping the commandments. Some are living with physical pain, or emotional pain, or disabilities that come with age. Some are troubled as to how to make ends meet financially, and some ache with the private loneliness of an empty house or an empty room or simply empty arms.<sup>32</sup>

The message was simple: "In the world we shall have tribulation, but we are to be of good cheer. Christ has overcome the world." Elder Holland denies that the Saints are to overcome sin and sorrow on their own. Being yoked with Christ makes one's burden light (Matthew 11:28–30), though some lifting and pulling is still required on the part of the faithful. Trying to pull the load alone brings disaster.

In his book *Following Christ*, Stephen E. Robinson points out that Protestants "mistakenly suppose the Latter-day Saints are working to be saved, and, unfortunately, so do some of our own people. . . . If we focus too much attention on the final accomplishment of our eternal goal, on becoming someday what our Father is, it is possible to undervalue or even overlook Christ's saving work, to glorify our own efforts instead and feel we are 'saving ourselves.'"<sup>33</sup> McCraney views any recent Latter-day Saint emphasis on grace as evidence that the doctrine of the church is shifting, rather than representing a reemphasis of a doctrine that the church has taught since 1830. Although the topics of grace and works in Latter-day Saint thought have received

---

32. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Peaceable Things of the Kingdom," *Ensign*, November 1996, 82.

33. Stephen E. Robinson, *Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 69–70.

different emphases over time, both have always maintained a place in Latter-day Saint soteriology in relation to the atonement of Jesus Christ. Given all that the church's leaders have said on grace and works, it will not do for critics like McCraney to claim that Latter-day Saints misunderstand, ignore, or disbelieve the atonement of Christ or that they are taught to independently perfect themselves.<sup>34</sup>

McCraney rightly notes that Latter-day Saints differentiate between salvation and exaltation (p. 32 n. 23). Salvation, which is ultimately granted to nearly all of God's children, is typically understood to include a person's resurrection from death and eventual attainment of a degree of glory in the hereafter. Exaltation is reserved for those who attain the highest possible degree of glory. The scriptures are clear that our relationship with God is contingent upon the mercy of Jesus Christ. In contrast, McCraney's view is stunted: "To Born-Again Mormons, salvation means living with God in heaven. End of story. Granted, Born-Again Mormons acknowledge that God will award different 'crowns' based on the works of the regenerated spirit involved, but these works are recognized only because of what people do *after* they are spiritually born again and not before" (p. 32 n. 23). Perhaps these "crowns" are parallel to the Latter-day Saint concept of degrees of glory, though McCraney makes no connection and is not clear if the works of a regenerated spirit depend upon an individual's agency. McCraney views Latter-day Saint conditions for exaltation as mere items on a legalistic checklist—that is, by doing enough good, people compensate for the bad they do, an approach that McCraney calls "the old, [*sic*] 'try and please Dad' trick" (p. 102). This so-called universal balance theory was denounced by Elder Dallin H. Oaks:

---

34. For a survey of Latter-day Saint sources since Joseph Smith that discuss the role of grace, see David L. Paulsen and Cory G. Walker, "Work, Worship, and Grace," *FARMS Review* 18/2 (2006): 83–176. One of McCraney's underlying themes is that the Church of Jesus Christ is bent on becoming "more Christian" and his mission is to spur that development forward. For discussion of related theological developments in Christianity in general, see Truman G. Madsen, "Are Christians Mormon?" *BYU Studies* 15/1 (1974): 1–20; and David L. Paulsen, "Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial," *BYU Studies* 45/1 (2006): 35–128.

The Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have *become*. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.<sup>35</sup>

McCraney ironically appeals to the same language that Elder Oaks and others have employed to demonstrate that human works are involved in the process of salvation:

We must also remember that Jesus said, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven . . .” (Matt 7:21–23). The fruits or “works” Jesus was speaking of were the fruits of Love that exude from those who have been spiritually born again. They do not necessarily mean a preponderance of earthly accomplishments and deeds that can be tallied and recorded. (p. 323)

But the scriptures, for the Saints, insist that good works necessarily follow repentance as the fruit of love prompted by God and are not mere items on a checklist. In fact, the scriptures warn that such hoop-jumping constitutes placing one’s trust in “dead works” while “denying the mercies of Christ” (e.g., Moroni 8:23, which refers specifically to the “dead work” of infant baptism).

### Myths of Spiritual Rebirth

McCraney has a list of characteristics that he associates with genuine spiritual rebirth (pp. 112–15). Much of his description easily aligns with what Latter-day Saints believe, though he notes no similarities. He holds that spiritual rebirth leads to a stronger desire to praise God

---

35. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 32–34.

for blessings and also a yearning to share the gospel. Desire for sin and worldliness decreases as strength to overcome temptations increases. Charitable acts will be prompted by God's grace, causing the believer to bear the fruit of good works. These descriptions, as well as direct references to being born of the Spirit, are found repeatedly in Latter-day Saint scripture.<sup>36</sup>

The book of Enos sets forth the process and result of being truly born again. After feeling convicted of his personal sins and acknowledging them by repenting with faith in the Messiah, Enos is filled with forgiveness, gratitude to God, and a powerful love and concern for others:

And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul. . . . And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. . . . And I said: Lord, how is it done? And he said unto me: Because of thy faith in Christ, whom thou hast never before heard nor seen. . . . Wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole. Now, it came to pass that when I had heard these words I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them. . . . And I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites. And it came to pass that after I had prayed and labored with all diligence, the Lord said unto me: I will grant unto thee according to thy desires, because of thy faith. (Enos 1:4–12)

McCraney also addresses several myths (his term) regarding the process of spiritual rebirth. For example, he denies—as would any Latter-day Saint who recalls the conversion experiences of Paul and Alma the Younger—that a person must be “worthy” in order to be

---

36. See, for example, Mosiah 2:4; Alma 38:12; 3 Nephi 12:6; Moroni 7:47–48; 8:26. King Benjamin's sermon in Mosiah 2–5 includes language describing the necessary rebirth. For references to being born again, see Mosiah 27:24–25, 28; Alma 5:14, 49; 7:14; 36:5, 23–24, 26; Doctrine and Covenants 5:16.

born again (p. 108). But he quickly parts ways with the Saints when he indicts them for believing that personal worthiness is usually a precondition for having the continuing influence of the Holy Ghost. McCraney finds this belief particularly galling. After hearing a young Latter-day Saint woman give a talk in church on that subject, he “had to actually pray for strength to refrain from attacking her well-intended ignorance after the meeting” (p. 110).

Another myth that McCraney chooses to rebut is the idea that spiritual rebirth is always instantaneous. Declaring a time, date, and place of one’s spiritual rebirth is like casting pearls before swine, he says, since uninitiated people will view the claim as “suspect and even farcical when described like an auto accident” (p. 107). As for the myth that a moment of spiritual rebirth automatically makes a person perfect, “this is a doctrine straight from the heart of hell” (p. 111). Although born-again Mormons have a decreased desire for sin, they “will continue . . . to make mistakes and yes, commit sins.” What is important, McCraney avers, is that “the *response* to sin is very different than it was when they were unregenerated”—that is, now they “peacefully see all people as failing in the flesh and, with patience and love, accept the . . . [other] born-again as forgiven works in progress” (pp. 111–12, emphasis in original). One danger McCraney sees in the idea of instantaneous regeneration is that it sets up unrealistic expectations. His own born-again experience was followed by backsliding because, he says, he neglected to study the Bible, pray, and fellowship with other Christians (i.e., non-Mormons).<sup>37</sup> His failures were devastating: “I . . . found myself in a far deeper spiritual pit than I had been before I ever knew the Lord” (p. 88).

Another myth McCraney counters is that merely saying a “sinner’s prayer” produces spiritual rebirth. In fact, in his view (based on Paul’s sudden, unasked-for conversion) *nothing* a sinner can do carries influence here since only God decides “when, how, where and if [spiritual rebirth] will ever occur in the heart of one of his creations”

---

37. Throughout the book, McCraney repeatedly asserts that Mormons are not Christians. For a solid critique of this view, see Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992).

(p. 105). Indeed, this issue of human agency is ambiguous throughout the book. One might ask McCraney why God does not simply cause all his creations to call on him *now*. Whereas Latter-day Saint doctrine clearly includes grace *and* works, God *and* man, and divine will *and* human agency in the process of salvation, McCraney insists it must be one or the other but vacillates by claiming, “Born-Again Mormons recognize salient arguments from both Calvin and Arminius and stand on biblically sound theology regarding salvation” without explaining exactly what that means or how it is possible (p. 152 n. 83). McCraney’s soteriology is logically untenable and presents a solid double standard:

There is no act, deed, amount of money, service, work, diligence, ordinance, attendance, temple rite, testimony, or self-sacrificial offering of any kind that could ever take any part of restoring fallen humanity to the presence of God. I cannot emphasize this point too emphatically. Such faithless acts or attitudes aren’t needed, aren’t worthy, and would never meet the demands of perfect justice that God demands for sin and rebellion. Few human ideologies more readily mock God, religious or otherwise, than for human beings to think they could ever do anything to contribute to the suffering, sacrifice, payment or atonement of sin Jesus gave on the cross. And yet it happens all the time. (p. 30)

After removing human will from the salvation equation, he then describes *what one must do* in order to be saved: “First, resign yourself to the fact that you are a sinner. . . . Next, ask out loud for Jesus to take over your sins and life. . . . Tell God that you accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of your life and that you turn your will and ways over to Him” (p. 116).

In order to be meaningful, these actions would require the agency and action of the believer, an impossibility from a Calvinistic stance in which God saves his elect through irresistible grace, the entire process from beginning to end being directly caused by God alone. In short, McCraney tells readers they can do *nothing* in order to be saved and then tells them exactly *what* they must do to be saved. This

double standard is captured in one sentence: “We are not at all in control of the situation but we must relinquish control to God” (p. 105). I cannot see how it is possible to relinquish what one never possessed. McCraney must either categorically state that true salvation by grace involves absolutely no effort, choice, or works on the part of the saved or recognize that his disagreement with Latter-day Saint doctrine is only quantitative, not qualitative.<sup>38</sup> As David Paulsen succinctly points out, “The idea of God asking that we do something before the fullness of his blessings is conferred is quite common in Christendom, even if it is believed that all he asks is that we accept Christ as our personal Savior.”<sup>39</sup>

From a Latter-day Saint view, the acknowledgment of individual agency makes a truly loving relationship between God and human-kind possible, a relationship wherein humans are more than mere creatures that God, in his mysterious wisdom, elects to save or damn. Rather, they are God’s children to whom he freely offers love and from whom he desires love in return. Certainly such a relationship seems to contradict the omnipotent, immovable God of the creeds because it limits his power. This limitation is beautifully and tragically represented by Jesus Christ’s lament atop the Mount of Olives overlooking the city where his own had rejected his offer of love:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! (Matthew 23:37, emphasis added)

McCraney believes it is difficult if not impossible for Latter-day Saints to actually extend love to God in this way. “More often than not,” he says, “Latter-day Saints have difficulty turning their total heart to God because they are so accustomed to taking matters into

---

38. For a thorough discussion of free will, grace, and salvation, see Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 391–429.

39. Paulsen and Walker, “Work, Worship, and Grace,” 97.

their own hands. . . . This is partly due to the theological idea . . . that Man is really good at heart instead of constantly prone to self-interest, pride, anger, and other evils of the spirit.” Because of this view, McCraney asserts that “there really is no great push, focus, or purpose for spiritual rebirth among the Saints. In the same vein, I’ve yet to hear a reasonable explanation of why Jesus said that we must be born-again, if we were born good or without a sinful spirit in the first place” (p. 106). His question can be avoided altogether once one understands that Latter-day Saints do not deny that they are fallen and must wrestle with the flesh and yield to the Spirit, relying “wholly upon the merits of [Christ]” in order to, through his grace, put off the natural man (2 Nephi 31:19; see Mosiah 3:19).

### The Failure of Anti-Mormonism

“By no measure can *Born-Again Mormon* be considered ‘anti-Mormon literature,’” McCraney asserts, because he has “purposefully omitted anything that attacks the Church through its unique history or the failures of its founders” (p. xiii). When earlier in his apostasy he consulted books critical of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine and then attempted to spread the “damning evidence,” he found most members unmoved and content to adhere to their presumably wrong-headed beliefs for entirely self-serving reasons (pp. 59–60). He then recognized “inherent difficulties” with anti-Mormon literature:

First, it does not lead to anyone’s feeling good about themselves (relative to the religion), and since most people generally only want to feel good about that to which they give their time and allegiance, it is highly ineffective to attack Latter-day Saints in this way. Second, I came to see that most genuinely anti-Mormon literature has been written to embarrass the Church and its members, so as a means of discovering absolute truth it is inferior. Finally, anti-Mormon literature . . . generally does as much to unify the Saints as to destroy them. Certainly there are casualties from the stuff, but more

often than not, Latter-day Saints . . . rally to the banner of the cause.” (pp. 60–61)<sup>40</sup>

This led him to conclude that “most anti-Mormon efforts would not be the tool the Lord Jesus would resort to or approve of. If I was going to get to know Him, Mormon or not, it would have to be through other means” (p. 61).

Critics who attack the Book of Mormon are wasting their time, McCraney declares, explaining that

for reasons still unclear, most writers who attack the authenticity and/or origins of the Book of Mormon do so on some of its more inconsequential aspects and fail to see the book for what it really was *intended* to be: a second witness of Jesus Christ.

And while thousands of books, articles, and pamphlets have attacked the Book of Mormon, its author, and its origins, most of them go to great lengths to prove it false through comparative studies that are inconclusive, subjective, and generally not very important to people who join or remain active in the Church. . . . What they all fail to understand is that it is not facts or true academic research that makes people accept the Book of Mormon, but it is their *desire* to find, know and please God; their *desire* to do good; their *desire* to belong to a worthy cause that overwhelmingly guides their religious lives and families. (pp. 174–75, emphasis in original)

It is true that Latter-day Saints generally believe a spiritual witness of the Book of Mormon to be more important than material proofs in the form of archaeology or otherwise. Still, in spite of this admission, McCraney attacks the authenticity and origins of the Book of Mormon on some of its more inconsequential aspects and fails to

---

40. “If you let us alone, we will do it a little more leisurely; but if you persecute us, we will sit up nights to preach the Gospel.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:320. For an interesting overview of the reaction some members of the church have to anti-Mormon literature and criticism, as well as recommendations for dealing with various criticism, see Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (Redding, CA: FAIR, 2008).

investigate the book for what it was *intended* to be: a second witness of Jesus Christ. He claims that the Book of Mormon is the product of Joseph Smith's environment, imagination, and the King James Version of the Bible (pp. 149–77, 187–280).<sup>41</sup>

Another problem McCraney found with much of the anti-Mormon literature he read was that it was simply too far-fetched:

Anti-Mormon authors tend to depict young Joseph Smith as indolent, lazy and oriented toward get-rich-quick schemes. These characterizations are unfair since the majority of all teenage boys are typically lazy, indolent and interested in get-rich-quick schemes. . . . Had he actually lived up to even half of the character assassinations leveled at him, it is doubtful that he would have had any followers at all. It's time for anti-Mormon writers and speakers—if they are truly to be considered Christian—to take another approach in enlightening Latter-day Saints. (pp. 121–22)

In spite of these problems, McCraney still borrows most of his historical material from Grant Palmer, Dan Vogel, D. Michael Quinn, and Craig Hazen in describing Joseph Smith as a well-intentioned fraud (pp. 119–48).

McCraney appears to believe his approach is something new. Perhaps it is, as far as many evangelical criticisms are concerned. There are unique strains of criticism coming from both secular and sectarian approaches, some depicting Joseph Smith as “demon-possessed” and others seeing him as a scoundrel or a “pious fraud.” McCraney's approach is an interesting hybrid of both—a rigid, fundamentalist approach to the Bible but a naturalistic, more secular approach to the

---

41. McCraney insists that “the Book of Mormon is no more threatening to Christianity than any biblically based piece of fictional literature, and no less impressive in its claims of Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. . . . No, it cannot in any way be considered holy writ or canon. No, it is not the work of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas. . . . But Born-Again Mormons place [it] on the same shelf as any work of fiction that seeks to exalt Jesus as the author of human salvation.” “The rub,” McCraney explains, citing Dan Vogel's *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), is that instead of admitting he wrote it to solve the religious controversies of his day, Joseph Smith lied about having received it from God (pp. 175–76).

Book of Mormon as an inspiring fiction and Joseph Smith as a pious fraud rather than an evil and false prophet. “*Born-Again Mormon* is not a regurgitation of early LDS history or an expose [*sic*] on the life and times of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Porter Rockwell or any other significant LDS figure of the past” (p. xiii). “I do discuss the early life of Joseph Smith but omit anything that could be considered an ‘anti-Mormon attack.’ I only recount those circumstances which I believe contributed greatly to the make-up of the man” (p. xiii n. 4).

Why does McCraney include so much “damning” information on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon if he feels that such an approach is ineffective in other anti-Mormon literature? He does so, he says, to keep people informed in their faith. However, he defines faith as independent of *and* reliant upon natural evidence, whichever best suits his case at any given time (pp. 183–84). “No group or person is truly making a choice or exercising faith when she or he avoids the facts of a matter,” he claims. “They are only choosing to believe what they want. It is imperative that every Born-Again Mormon search for himself or herself all that he or she can find about the Church, its history and its doctrine before they decide to reject it, re-embrace it, or attack it. Factual evidence is there, Saints of Latter-days, but it must be sought, sorted, admitted, and understood in context and ultimately digested before anyone can deny or accept the truth that the Church proclaims” (pp. 141–42).

There have been many responses to the historical interpretation McCraney advances, and I join him in encouraging Latter-day Saints to be well informed on the history of the church. But such investigative rigor, according to McCraney, need not apply outside Mormonism, especially in regard to the Bible: “Some people might argue that the same examination should occur when considering the tenets of Christianity. But the comparison is not a good one. As mentioned earlier, the Bible stands firmly on a foundation of historical, genetic and linguistic proofs and supports while the Book of Mormon, the keystone to the LDS faith, stands on nothing. Informed belief is good. Ignorant belief is merely an extension of ignorance” (p. 344). It remains unclear how the continued existence and verifiability of the

city of Jerusalem proves the resurrection of Christ or any other biblical miracle. Even so, in *I Was a Born-Again Mormon* all of the Bible's claims are foregone conclusions solidly verified, as is McCraney's overconfident claim that nothing in the Book of Mormon indicates ancient origin.<sup>42</sup> While questioning the Book of Mormon is seen as imperative, doing the same with the Bible is evidence of a fallen, unredeemed nature: "Born-Again Mormons study the Bible and trust solely in the truths it provides the world. . . . When people from the alleys of higher criticism attempt to discredit the Bible and shake believers loose from its fruitful bows [*sic*], we see it as an attempt of the unregenerated to impose their limited views on the human soul" (pp. 219–20).

Finally, McCraney aptly recognizes that some anti-Mormon material is extremely offensive to active Latter-day Saints when it ridicules their sacred temple rituals. While drawing parallels between a

---

42. According to McCraney, "the Book of Mormon has yet to find one single linguistic, historical, genetic, or geographical material support. In fact, there have only been material discoveries that refute Book of Mormon claims" (p. 184). For "authoritative insights into recent scientific findings," he sends his readers to a deeply flawed DVD entitled *DNA versus the Book of Mormon*, created by Living Hope Ministries. For reviews of the film, see FAIR's topical guide at [www.fairlds.org/apol/ai195.html](http://www.fairlds.org/apol/ai195.html) and also a number of essays on DNA issues and the Book of Mormon in *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003) and 18/1 (2006). McCraney avoids any mention of scholarship that puts the Book of Mormon on a solid footing geographically, archaeologically, linguistically, culturally, and so on. For one convenient source that covers much of this ground, see Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002). On the discovery of the name *NHM* on altars in southern Arabia that date to Lehi's time and corroborate the historicity of the place-name *Nahom* in the Book of Mormon, see S. Kent Brown, "The Place Which Was Called Nahom?: New Light from Ancient Yemen," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 66–68; and Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 57–61. For a review of archaeological findings over the past fifty years that increasingly support the historicity of the Book of Mormon and that augur well for future discoveries, see John E. Clark, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Relics," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (2006): 38–49. An important overview of these issues is Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). In stating that "the Church, in association with Brigham Young University, has an entire department called [FARMS] . . . that has, on occasion, been consumed with the idea that it can present and/or locate infallible material proofs that will somehow legitimize the Church's claims on the historic [*sic*] veracity of the Book of Mormon" (p. 182), McCraney falsely implies skepticism on the part of the Church of Jesus Christ and BYU.

dream by Joseph Smith Sr. and the Book of Mormon, he stops short, explaining “there are parallels to other LDS rites practiced today which, out of respect, will not be mentioned here” (p. 135). To his credit, McCraney respectfully avoids discussing the temple in detail, other than hinting at ties to Masonry (p. 210), claiming that temples are no longer needed for Christians (pp. 218–19), and noting that changes were made to the temple ceremony in 1990 (p. 259).

### Shawn’s Army

McCraney believes that he has identified the proper approach to converting Latter-day Saints and that other efforts by anti-Mormon ministries are flawed. *Born-Again Mormon* was written largely as a guide to help born-again Mormons proselyte fellow Latter-day Saints to be born again themselves. One interesting aspect of McCraney’s story that is absent from his book is his desire to lead the charge of born-again Mormons by attempting to rejoin the Church of Jesus Christ. An excerpt from his Web site that has since been removed explained:

The bornagainmormon [*sic*] mission is to bring other members of the Church to Jesus. I’m convinced that part of this mission is for me to be rebaptized in the Church as a Christian and ONLY as a Christian. I’ve met with our kind Stake president many times regarding the subject. I’ve committed to be active, serve, keep the commandments, keep my mouth shut and even shut my website down (if commanded) but they will not let me re-join because I will not accept Joseph Smith nor will I acknowledge that the LDS Church is the ONLY true Church on the face of the earth. This whole concept is difficult for many Christian’s [*sic*] to understand let alone Latter-day Saints. But bottom line, I am a doctrinal Christian through and through—who appreciates the earthly organization of the Church. God willing, this ministry will help other Latter-day Saints know the Lord in the same living way.<sup>43</sup>

---

43. This explanation can still be seen at [www.4witness.org/ldsnews/bornagainmormon.php](http://www.4witness.org/ldsnews/bornagainmormon.php) (accessed 5 June 2009). In his Sunstone presentation “On the Verge” (at the

McCraney also believes that

in time, Born-Again Mormons will play a significant role in completely eliminating the superfluous human made [*sic*] aspects of Mormonism. . . . As Born-Again Mormons gather in number and strength, it is anticipated that the present Church . . . will become less esoteric in its religious adherence and more biblically inclined. . . . Eventually all the peculiar practices and beliefs which presently serve as important doctrines of salvation to the Saints will begin to fade in the light of biblical truth and open praise for the Lord. (pp. 283–84)

Although McCraney claims that “a Born-Again Mormon does not attach any religious affiliation, ordinance, or denominational demands to salvation through Jesus Christ” (p. 289) and that his book similarly “is not concerned about religious forms, titles, or dogmatic claims” (p. 291), he repeatedly asserts that regeneration will result in a correct view of the Bible and in the acquisition of Christian attributes that are consistent with the new affiliation, denominational demands, and dogmatic positions he now espouses (p. 335). A born-again Mormon, he insists, will recognize the Bible as “God’s only divine written Word” (p. 289). “Most stalwart Latter-day Saints,” on the other hand, are simply incapable of truly understanding the Bible (p. 226).<sup>44</sup> Even the vocabulary of a genuinely saved Saint will change (p. 286 n. 138). McCraney believes that “the unintended but natural tendency to use words and phrases common to reborn Christians (e.g. Jesus, God, the Word, the Word of God, Lord, Praise God, blessed)” is a sign of true spiritual rebirth (p. 114).

---

55:40 mark), McCraney describes this attempt at rebaptism in order to “rejoin the Church as a Christian.”

44. McCraney emphasizes that “the greatest obstacle” preventing a Latter-day Saint from becoming born again is “the LDS view of the Bible” (p. 178). Thus, a “general discounting of the Bible and its authority as God’s Word” encourages a “literal and selective” approach to the Bible that only serves the interests of Latter-day Saints (p. 208). This was Joseph Smith’s “greatest disservice” and “most damaging act,” leading Latter-day Saints to “distrust and even mock the holy Word of God” (p. 210). In addition to not substantiating these claims, McCraney does not adequately explain why his understanding of the Bible is superior to that of Latter-day Saints.

McCraney advises “Born-Again Mormons” who wish to remain in the church to never be disruptive in church meetings but to enlighten others only in private. If teaching in church, they are to “adapt the Church-prescribed material to fit biblical truth without fanfare or attention” (pp. 290–91). McCraney seems to hope that his efforts will lead to a subtle integration of Latter-day Saints individually and then collectively into some portion of the evangelical movement, which he sees as authentic Christianity. This course correction would require denying the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, and all other distinguishing Latter-day Saint beliefs. In this way the Saints could become part of McCraney’s “Body of Christ.”

This is the point of *Born-Again Mormon*: to patiently and peacefully get members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to give Jesus a real, straightforward, holding-nothing-back try. To take Him from the footnotes of theology and place Him in their hearts. When they do, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will become a Church of Jesus Christ of Born-Again Believers, and millions of individuals, along with their families, will freely and openly give praise to God Almighty for the gift of new life instead of the constant manta [*sic*] of praise to the man. (p. 288)

In the end, I must agree with McCraney’s brother, who, after seeing the book, told Shawn that the title *Born-Again Mormon* is redundant. Although McCraney concedes that “there are plenty of Latter-day Saints who have genuinely been spiritually regenerated by God through their faith on Jesus Christ,” he maintains that most of the Saints “do not possess any semblance of the true, spiritual rebirth which is universally found throughout millions of denominationally divergent Christian believers worldwide.” To him this is “a gigantic (and wholly avoidable) religious and spiritual tragedy” that he aims to set right (p. xviii).

Whatever else one might say about the problematic aspects of *I Was a Born-Again Mormon*, at least McCraney’s overall desire for

Latter-day Saints to become truly born again can be welcomed by them, though a Latter-day Saint understanding of the actual process differs from McCraney's personal views:

And the Lord said . . . : Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; . . . and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 27:25–26)

Missing that inheritance *would* be a tragedy.